



**Rep. Mary Skinner**



**Rep. Jim Clements**

# 14<sup>th</sup> District



## 1998 Opening Session Report

*February 1998*

*Dear friends,*

*A new year has begun and so has a new legislative session. This year, our session, which began Jan. 12, is scheduled to last only 60 days. But we have much to accomplish during this short time period.*

*At the top of the list will be how to deal with an \$861 million budget surplus. Many people are looking for ways to spend that money. Although there may be room for some tax cuts and satisfying transportation needs, we believe that it is best to abide by Initiative 601 which calls for the surplus to be set aside in case of a future economic downturn.*

*Other issues before us include reducing property taxes, funding transportation needs, cracking down on drunk drivers, growth management, improving early reading programs in schools, and more. This newsletter offers a brief look at these and other important issues facing us in the 1998 session. In addition, we have included the results of our recent survey. Should you have any questions about these or other topics, please feel free to call or write our offices.*

*Thank you for the honor of allowing us to serve you.*

Rep. Mary Skinner  
(360) 786-7810

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(360) 786-7856

### **Standing up for taxpayers**

The new session began with continued economic growth, full employment and further growth in state revenues. Initiative 601's spending limit held down the growth of government spending and re-oriented the Legislature. You demanded taxpayer relief — not new spending programs.

We responded by holding growth of the state general-fund budget to the lowest level in 25 years, while repealing most of the massive tax rate increases that occurred in 1993 and 1994. We are continuing to actively pursue other ways to return your money to you.

After three years of tax cuts, the state budget surplus is still more than \$861 million. This surplus is mostly the result of I-601 budget constraints, economic growth (\$310 million) and carryover money from the previous budget period (\$550 million). Since the \$550 million from prior years is one-time-only money that, if spent, will be gone, there is general agreement to hold at least \$500 million of the surplus in reserve for any future downturn in the economy.

Proposals have been introduced to return some of the remaining money to you in the form of further tax cuts, including a reduction in your vehicle license fees. We will be looking at these ideas very carefully in an effort to provide permanent and meaningful tax relief.

# Rep. Mary Skinner

# Rep. Jim Clements

## ***Funding transportation without tax increases***

Those of us involved in agriculture in the Yakima Valley know how important it is to have a strong transportation system to move our products from farm-to-market. Yet even some of our local roadways have suffered because of the lack of money available to fix them.

When a statewide transportation revenue shortfall was projected three years ago, Mary and other House Transportation Policy and Budget Committee members began looking at possible funding sources. They studied the transportation budget line-by-line, item-by-item, and found \$100 million that could be redirected from administration into actual highway projects. The committee also suggested other long-term options, including transferring funds from the undedicated portion of the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (money you pay to license your vehicle, also known as MVET) into the transportation budget. The suggestion was held off since the Legislature wanted to use surplus revenues for increased tax relief.

Last year, a proposal to increase the gas tax for additional revenue landed flat on its face. And this year, leaders in the House and Senate say a gas tax increase will **not** be considered. So instead, they are once again looking at our initial suggestion of transferring money from MVET to increase future funding of transportation.

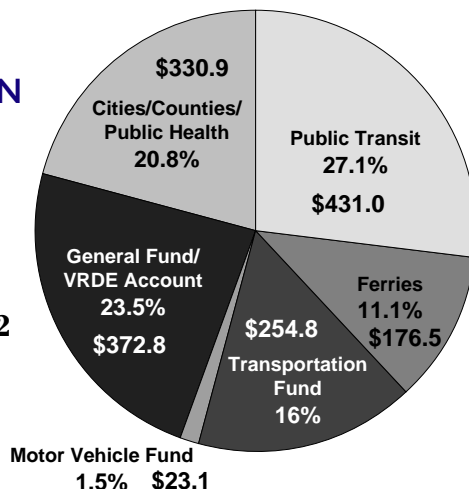
## ***MVET breakdown***

Only in recent years has the money you pay for your vehicle license tabs gone toward roads, highways and

### **CURRENT DISTRIBUTION OF MVET REVENUES**

*(Revenues in Millions)*

**TOTAL: \$1,589.2**



***Rep. Mary Skinner discusses concerns of Yakima County with House Speaker Clyde Ballard.***

other transportation needs. This tax was originally enacted in 1937 in place of a property tax on vehicles. Back then, all of this revenue went to K-12 education. Today, the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax is directed to several areas of state government, including transportation.

## ***Providing more local transit support***

Current law allows money from the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (MVET) to be matched with local dollars for local transit agencies, except for city-operated transit systems which are funded by a sales tax. Yakima is one of the exceptions and does not receive MVET money. You pay this money locally for your vehicle license and it currently benefits other transit systems around the state, but not Yakima. The policy allowed city systems to operate regional services, but Yakima County voters turned down a regional system a couple of years ago. Since then, the revenue stream for Yakima Transit has not been able to keep up with demand.

Mary has introduced a bill which would authorize Yakima Transit to count its local sales tax dedicated to transit as a match in order to recoup MVET authorized for transit. The state would credit that amount of MVET so the tax rate remains the same for local taxpayers. The bill would provide Yakima Transit with an additional \$2.5 million annually.

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## ***Reducing property taxes***

Skyrocketing property taxes in Yakima County have made it increasingly difficult for people to stay in their homes. During Mary's property tax town hall meeting in October, local residents were angered about the significant increases in their tax assessments. "Where are we supposed to get the money?" asked one Yakima resident whose property tax bill increased by \$600 in three years.

We are pleased that voters overwhelmingly approved Referendum 47. One result of the new law is that future increases in property taxes will be cut in half, if local government honors the referendum by strictly limiting your local taxes.

While Referendum 47 offers some short- and long-term relief, we believe more must be done to reduce property taxes, especially for senior citizens and the disabled. Mary has co-sponsored a bill that would change the senior property tax exemption in several ways. The measure would raise the exemption level from \$28,000 to \$30,000 and it would cover all primary residence property. It would also allow medical insurance premi-

ums to be factored when determining income levels, and it would include a periodic review of income levels to see if adjustments are needed. Mary is also working with Yakima County Assessor Ray Hall to find additional and equitable property tax relief for seniors.

## ***Cracking down on drunk drivers***

Our recent survey told you that half of the accidents in 1996 where people were killed involved alcohol. Your response in our survey weighed heavily toward stronger DUI laws. Here are some of the proposals being considered this year to crack down on drunk drivers:

- Lower the illegal blood-alcohol concentration from .10 to .08
- Require certain people convicted of drunk driving to operate only vehicles equipped with ignition interlock devices
- Authorize impoundment and forfeiture of vehicles operated by individuals with a suspended or revoked driver's license
- Authorize impoundment of vehicles whenever a driver violates DUI laws
- Increase fines and jail times nearly threefold for people convicted of DUI. The maximum would be one year in prison, a \$2,000 fine and permanent license revocation for a person convicted of DUI who has two or more prior DUIs within seven years
- Prohibit people convicted of DUI from obtaining an occupational driver's license or certificate of vehicle ownership, or from purchasing, renting or leasing a vehicle
- Require a motorist's driver's license to be administratively suspended for 90 days without exception for a first DUI conviction
- Increase the sentence of someone convicted of DUI if that person has prior DUIs; an individual convicted of vehicular homicide would receive the standard sentence plus two years for every prior DUI conviction

We plan to take whatever steps are necessary to remove drunk drivers from our highways and increase public safety on the road.



***Rep. Jim Clements makes a point on the floor of the House of Representatives.***

# 1998 questionnaire results

We thank all of you who took the time to answer the survey we recently mailed out. The responses were very interesting and give us a good insight to some of the issues we are facing in the 1998 legislative session. The following are the results from the questionnaire.

**1** Rank the top three issues that are of greatest importance to you.

- 34% crime
- 23% education
- 19% health care
- 8% environment
- 6% property taxes
- 5% transportation
- 5% social services

**2** Would you support a general increase in the state gas tax to fund transportation projects around the state?

- 73% no

**3** Would you support a gas tax increase if the money went specifically to fund central Washington projects?

- 56% no

**4** Washington state's robust economy has resulted in a state revenue surplus of \$823 million. What action should the Legislature take, if any, with this money?

- 23% The Legislature should provide additional tax relief
- 23% The surplus revenue should be used to retire debt to save money on future interest payments
- 21% The money should be shifted from the general fund to transportation to maintain and improve our roads and highways
- 21% Reduce the state's current budget surplus by returning excess revenue to counties and cities for local services
- 12% The surplus revenue should be kept in an emergency reserve fund to protect

against a downturn in the economy which might force program cuts or tax increases

**5** What is your opinion about our state's growth management law?

The state's Growth Management Act is working well and should not be changed

- 72% disagree

More flexibility and local control is needed within the Growth Management Act

- 83% agree

For the most part, the Growth Hearings Boards are making the right decisions with regard to local comprehensive plans

- 67% disagree

The Growth Hearings Boards have outlived their usefulness and should be eliminated

- 60% agree

The Growth Management Act should be repealed

- 58% agree

**6** In the past year, more than 200 juvenile offenders escaped from group homes and halfway houses. Two people, an elderly woman in Spokane and a babysitter in Stanwood, were murdered — allegedly by juveniles who escaped from group homes. Which statement best describes your views?

- 71% The Legislature should implement stricter accountability laws for group homes/ halfway houses contracted by the state
- 24% Group homes/halfway houses compromise public safety and should be eliminated
- 5% No changes are needed



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**7** Would you support alternatives to incarceration such as probation and electronic monitoring for non-violent drug offenders?

63% yes

**8** *In 1996, 712 people died in traffic accidents on Washington's highways. Half of those accidents were alcohol related. Fifteen states have lowered their legal limit for intoxication as a means of reducing drunk driving, adopting a .08 blood alcohol content (BAC) standard. Washington state's BAC standard remains at .10. Please tell us your opinion:*

Should Washington state adopt the lower legal BAC limit of .08?

65% yes

## Should lawmakers target repeat DUI offenders by permanently revoking their drivers' licenses?

79% yes

Should a DUI offender's automobile be permanently confiscated by the state upon the second offense?

64% yes

**9** *State law requires health insurance companies to provide coverage to all citizens, regardless of any pre-existing medical conditions. An increasing number of people are choosing to wait until they are sick to buy insurance. This drives up the cost of insurance for all consumers. Should the Legislature modify the guaranteed coverage policy for those with pre-existing conditions?*

60% yes

**10** Currently, most decisions regarding water rights and usage are determined by the state Department of Ecology. Would you support giving counties greater authority over decisions regarding local water use?

77% yes

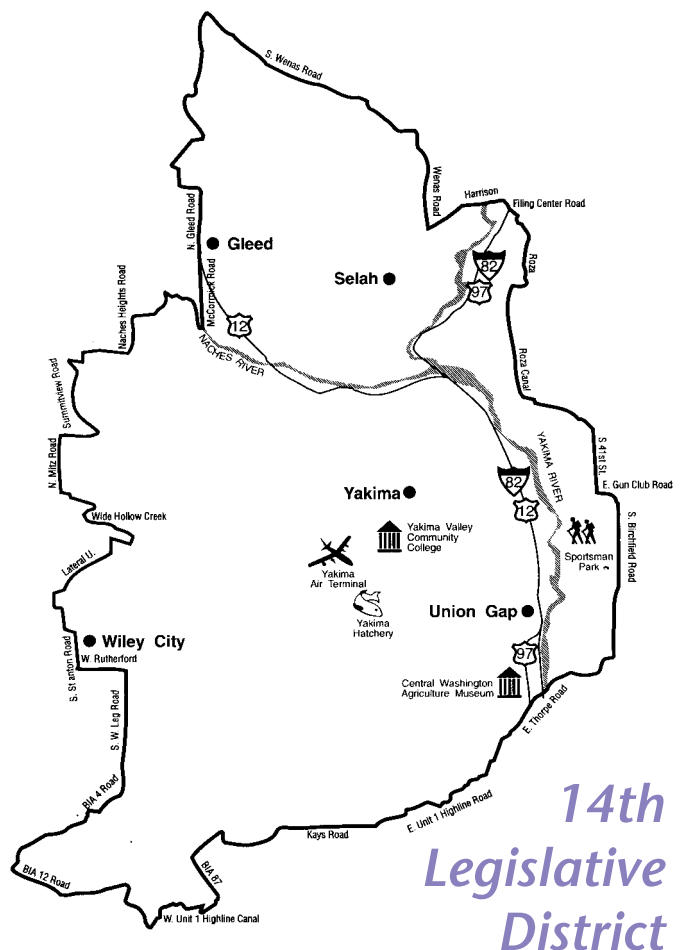
**11** In your opinion, what is the **best** way to deal with the seasonal worker housing shortage?

55% Allow farmers to build temporary shelters using a separate seasonal worker housing code

27% Designate special seasonal camping areas with showers and cooking facilities

12% Provide technical assistance and grants to farmers to help build on-site housing that meets the state housing code

6%	Build state-subsidized community housing for seasonal farm workers
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**Toll-free Legislative Hotline: 1-800-562-6000**



## *The 1998 legislative session: Our commitment to you*



During the 1998 legislative session, we are prepared to pursue an agenda that will carry forward the progress we've made to date, while seeking solutions to other problems we face. We intend to:

- ✓ Remain steadfast in our commitment to protect taxpayers by holding the line on unnecessary state spending through the creation of needless bureaucracy
- ✓ Continue our efforts to improve the quality of education with a special emphasis on doing a better job of teaching reading so that our children will be better equipped to learn throughout their school careers
- ✓ Encourage greater parental involvement in the education of their children and provide more choices and options for students and parents
- ✓ Do more to protect our families, our homes and our communities from the threat of

juvenile crime with a special effort to improve the security and monitoring of detention facilities

- ✓ Take action to stop dangerous criminals from being let loose in our communities where they pose a danger to our safety
- ✓ Do a better job of protecting society from the drunk drivers who are responsible for far too many tragedies by taking away licenses, impounding cars and other strict penalties
- ✓ Find ways to responsibly and effectively meet the transportation needs of our state **without raising taxes**
- ✓ Our focus will remain on making government more accountable and improving the way government treats its citizens